DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 183 562 SP 015 829

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TITLE It's a Good Job for a Woman (and a Man): Why Males and Females Choose to be Elementary School Teachers.
PUB DATE Aug 79
NOTE 18p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (Boston, MA, August 1979).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Career Choice: Decision Making: Economic Factors: *Elementary School Teachers: Equal Opportunities (Jobs): *Females: Job Satisfaction: *Males: Occupational Mobility: *Sex Stereotypes: Socioeconomic Status: *Teacher Attitudes: Teacher Employment: Teacher Salaries

ABSTRACT

Interviews of male and female teachers working in a large urban center indicate that sex and socioeconomic variables are significant reasons for becoming elementary school teachers. Males decide to become elementary school teachers late in their college years or after graduation, often as a compromise career choice. Males appear willing to cross sex-typed job lines if they see opportunities for financial rewards, good working conditions, or upward mobility. In contrast, women often decide to become elementary school teachers before entering college, because they believe it offers more financial rewards and better working conditions than other female sex-type jobs. (Author/JD)

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ED183562

MAR 24 1980

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Unpub.
A-8 79
17 p.

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IT'S A GOOD JOB FOR A WOMAN (AND A MAN): WHY MALES AND FEMALES CHOOSE TO BE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS *

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*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author.

Paper presented at American Sociological Association Meetings, Boston, Massachusetts, August 1979.

I am grateful to Murray Hausknecht, Judith Lorber, John Goering, Laurie Davidson, and to my study group: Susan Maizel Chambre, Kathy Charles, Barbara Grenell, Natalie Hannon, Dorothy J. Jessop, Corinne Kirchner, Karolynn Segal and Natalie Sokoloff for their support, discussions and criticisms on the larger research project of which this is part.

SP015829

IT'S A GOOD JOB FOR A WOMAN (AND A MAN):
WHY MALES AND FEMALES CHOOSE TO BE
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Abstract

Interviews of male and female teachers working in a large northeastern urban center indicate that sex and socioeconomic variables are significant reasons for becoming elementary school teachers. Males decide to become elementary school teachers late in their college years or after graduation, often as a compromise career choice. Males appear willing to cross sex-typed job lines if they see opportunities for financial rewards, good working conditions, and upward mobility. In sharp contrast, women often decide to become elementary school teachers before entering college. Females appear to learn early in their lives that their career choices are limited to female sex-typed jobs. They choose to become elementary teachers because they believe it offers more financial rewards, and better working conditions than other female sex-typed jobs.

The number of women workers doubled between 1950 and 1974; women now account for nearly two-fifths of all workers (U.S. Department of Labor, 1975, p. 9). But, there has not been a corollary increase in the types of jobs women tend to hold. Women workers tend to be found in those jobs traditionally held by other women. A case in point is elementary school teaching.

Elementary school teaching has been primarily women's work since the 1830's, when it was one of the only jobs open to educated women with middle class status or aspirations (Smuts, 1971, p. 9). Teaching has remained the largest professional occupation for women; non-college teachers accounted for over 43 percent of the women employed in professional occupations (U.S. Department of Labor, 1975, p. 95). More than half of the women teachers were employed in elementary school teaching (U.S. Department of Labor, 1975, p. 95).

Elementary school teaching along with social work, nursing, and secretarial work are female sex-typed jobs. Occupations are sex-typed when one sex is the "very large majority" of workers and "there is an associated normative expectation that is as it should be" (Epstein, 1971, p. 152). Although there has been an increase in the number of men working as elementary school teachers; from 9 percent in 1950 to 15 percent in 1960 (Oppenheimer, 1970, p. 77) to 15 percent in 1973 (U.S. Department of Labor, 1975, p. 95); women remain the overwhelming majority of elementary school teachers.

This study analyzes the reasons male and female teachers gave for becoming elementary school teachers. Sex and socioeconomic

variables appeared to be significant factors. Their reasons provide possible insights why males cross sex-typed job lines and females choose sex-typed jobs. The male teachers' reasons will be presented first: followed by the female teachers' reasons.

PROCEDURES

In 1976 to 1977, thirty-two public elementary school teachers participated in partially structured interviews which lasted from two to four hours and took place outside the school setting. The sample consisted of seventeen female teachers and fifteen male teachers. The sample included teachers in "ghetto" areas and working class and middle class neighborhoods in a large northeastern urban center. Because there are no citywide lists of teachers available for drawing a random sample, it was decided that the best way to develop a sample was through a "snowball technique" (Alex, 1968, p. 69). A pilot study conducted prior to the interviews, demonstrated respondents would not talk to a researcher about their work experiences without the researcher being referred by a friend. Teachers and administrators were asked to recommend at least one person to interview. People working outside the school system were also used as referral sources, and they recommended teachers and administrator friends, neighbors, and relatives. To minimize bias numerous (120) sources for referrals were used.

Efforts were made to include school personnel from all age groups, married and unmarried teachers as well as those with and without children. The male teachers were younger; thirteen of the males were younger than

forty years of age compared to ten of the females. The oldest male was forty-five years old and the oldest woman was fifty-eight.

The women tended to have spent more years as teachers. Eight of the women compared to one of the men taught fifteen to twenty-four years. Less than half of the women (8) taught from five to fourteen years while most of the men (13) taught the same number of years. The longer length of service of the females reflects the general patterns of participation of males in elementary school teaching. Males entered teaching in greater numbers in the 1960's and 1970's. The females' longer length of service also reflects the age distribution, and, possibly, the better opportunities of males to become administrators. Because the effect of sex on career patterns was the major focus of the study, the effect of race, another variable with impact on channeling processes, was controlled by including only whites.*

WHY MEN BECOME ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

The males' decisions to become teachers were often made late in their young adulthood; fourteen of the fifteen decided to be teachers in their senior year of college or later.

The reasons the men gave for becoming teachers fell into three categories: 1) the easy accessibility of teaching positions made it attractive work, 2) elementary school teaching was a draft deferment and 3) teaching represented social mobility.

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*This paper focuses on only one aspect of a larger research project. The larger study included interviews of administrators, school board members, Central Board, community district office, and union officials, and an analysis of their career patterns.

The Easy Accessibility of Teaching Positions Makes It Attractive Work

Elementary school teaching is a job that requires minimal credentials which are easily attainable. Lortie reports undergraduate teacher preparation programs are not noted for their high selectivity and are readily available at low tuition public supported colleges (1965, pp. 18-19). College graduates often can begin teaching as a "substitute" teacher with only a minimum number of education credits and complete their certification for a "regular" teaching license by taking education courses in the evening and summers.

A recurring theme is that elementary school teaching was a job that required minimal credentials and was easily accessible. Most of the men entering teaching before the mid-seventies when the shortage of teaching positions began. Going into teaching appeared to be a compromise, almost transitory career decision.

> I majored I guess about in everything. I minored in just about everything also. . . . When I came into it (teaching), you know, there was a place for everyone and so this is the sort of thing that people went into if they wanted the summer off. My original intention when I went into teaching was to work a couple of months a year and then to go somewhere. . . . I kept the sub-license, because I had in my mind to really be a drifter. (Jack)

> I was at the seminary for a year. Although I liked the seminary, I just didn't think the priesthood was for me. . . . So I decided to join the army. I think I was in service less than a year and I knew the service was not for me. . . . I guess in my second year in the army I decided I wanted to be a teacher. . . . Part of the reason was that you wouldn't have to ask for a job. You got your degree and they (the school system) would snatch you. (Phillip)

Elementary School Teaching Was a Draft Deferment

Three men specifically stated they went into teaching to avoid the draft.

> I decided to go into teaching to stay out of the army. My last year at (college) I took six credits of ed.each semester which was enough at that time to get a sub.(substitute) license. (Bob)

However, those escaping the draft were not very different from the others upon entry; all three groups appeared not to be committed to teaching as a career.

Teaching and the Social Mobility of Men

Teaching appeared to be one of the few professions open to working and lower-middle class males graduating with mediocre college records, a liberal arts degree, and no specific career goal. Lortie found teaching to be an "important medium of upward mobility for men" (1975, p. 35). This was true of the male teachers in the sample, for all but three of them teaching did indeed represent upward mobility. Teaching offered them a professional job, one with greater prestige, salary and security than those of their parents.

Most of the men came from working class or lower-middle class homes with fathers in either low prestige jobs or jobs with low incomes such as Transit Authority worker, salesman, x-ray technician, and low-level government office worker. Most of the families of the male teachers lacked the financial resources to send them to graduate schools. The families also lacked the kind of information about professional occupa-

tions which would have helped their sons to become professionals, and the colleges did not fill the information gaps.

> I studied to be an electrical engineer. I was having trouble with the math. . . . It wasn't a joy like it should be if that is going to be your life's work. . . . Teaching came up. (John)

Upon graduation from college the men felt obliged to seek jobs which would make them self-supporting. But with only Liberal Arts degrees the men had few careers open to them. Becoming a school teacher for a working class or lower-middle class man meant choosing a career with a relatively acceptable beginning salary, status, job security and job benefits not associated with blue collar or most low level white collar work. Teaching appeared to be the best of the available choices.

> I did not really plan on being a teacher in college. I had feelings that I just wouldn't be happy in an office and that wouldn't be what I wanted. And teaching just sounded better and I knew I liked children. I was kind of vague. Everything about it just sounded much better than being behind a desk all day. (Ralph)

Several men worked at other jobs before they went into teaching.

> I was working at Smith's Sportswear, and one of the guys who worked there part-time was a teacher. So one day they needed a substitute in his school, a sixth grade teacher, so I went up there and taught that day. It was the first time I ever entered a classroom. . . . I had such a good time, so I said, maybe I will stick to that. Two or three days later the principal called me. He wanted to know if I'd come back and sub.. So, I went a few days, and then he said, would you like a job next year, we need a teacher. I said, great, fabulous! So, that is how I got stuck in sixth grade, and I've been teaching ever since. (Owen)

Seven of the men had junior high licenses as well as elementary school licenses. Four of the men started as junior high school teachers but changed to elementary school positions to avoid the behavior problems associated with pre-adolescent and adolescent children.

> I worked as a junior high school teacher for one year; it was very difficult because of the discipline. (Jack)

The other three men went right into teaching on the elementary school level.

> I accepted the elementary school position even though I had those other licenses. My first appointment was on the junior high license, and I turned it down because I had worked with those age children one summer at camp. I didn't care for that but I have always liked being with the little ones and it was fun and you know the hours were excellent and vacation time and all that. (Charles)

One man in the sample stood in sharp contrast to the other fourteen men and most closely paralleled the female school teachers in his reasons for choosing to be an elementary school teacher.

> I always wanted to be a teacher. A good profession, an important job, respectable job and it seemed like it had a lot of breathing space to be yourself. My parents were always encouraging me to go to be a teacher. My mother did; my father was apathetic because I guess my father didn't have such great success in school. (Bill)

Bill chose teaching not to avoid more unpleasant choices such as the draft or sales work but because his mother encouraged him to be a teacher. This man is unusual because he grew up wanting to be a teacher.

WHY WOMEN BECOME ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

The period of time in their lives when the women decided to become elementary school teachers stood in sharp contrast to the men. Over half of them had already decided to be elementary school teachers by the time they were in high school and four more had decided to be elementary school teachers by their junior year in college. By that time, then, thirteen of the seventeen women expected to be elementary school teachers, took elementary education courses, and thought of themselves as future elementary school teachers. For most of the women the decision to become an elementary school teacher was made early in their lives and was a long time ambition.

The reasons the women gave for becoming elementary school teachers fell into four categories: 1) teaching is a good job for a woman, 2) home and school experiences portray elementary school teaching as attractive work, 3) teaching enabled them to fulfill family responsibilities and 4) teaching offered social mobility.

Teaching is a Good Job For a Woman

The women's early decisions to become elementary school teachers are related to their perception that the only occupations available to them were those within the realm of women's sex-typed work: nursing, social work, secretarial work, and school teaching. All the female teachers, including the young women who entered teaching in the early 1970's, saw female sex-typed work as the only occupations available to them.

> Well, for a long time in the history of women, respectable jobs for women were teaching, nursing and very little else! There just was nothing else. A teacher was a professional and a clean job. Nursing was not as well paid as teaching and it entailed things that were not so pleasant. If you didn't want that kind of thing you went into teaching. (Sally)
>
> Besides, nursing and being a secretary, what else was open? Not much else was open to us. (Jane)

The women were extremely aware of the advantages of working as teachers as compared to working in other female sex-typed jobs. Lortie found women teachers "saw money as a positive feature" of teaching (1975, p. 3).

> There are not so many jobs that women can get. For women it is a good paying job. . . . When you figure on what women get paid as secretaries and salespeople and clerks or even junior executives today, then it's a fairly well paying job. The opportunities for women are not the same, monetarily they are not the same as opportunities for men. They never have been and they are not now. So, when it comes to money it is a fairly well paying job. It gives good holiday time. It gives you good hours. (Alice)

The women's perceptions that teaching is better paid and has more pleasant working conditions than do other sex-typed female occupations is accurate. Two women upon graduation from college chose not to become teachers, but their experiences as secretaries soured them on that work and directed them to teaching.

> I did everything in college except student teaching. I decided I wasn't going to teach. I worked as a secretary. . . . Then, I went to work for one of these very large mill companies. Of course, I was bored and wanted to go on to the next step. They gave it to a man, instead of me. I knew the job

> because I used to take it over when the supervisor was away. . . . They called in a man from another department, to promote to that job. . . . I took the sub.license exam. . . . And then I left. (Sally)
>
> I was a secretary in a big firm for two years. . . . Women were looked down upon and you are just there to help men. I found no way to further myself in business. . . . It was not the way to live a life. Financially, as a woman, I got less than a teacher. (Karen)

Teachers can earn more, have better hours, vacations, job benefits, and greater social status than do secretaries or nurses or librarians. The highest paid secretaries working for top offices in larger corporations earned $169 a week or approximately $8,788 annually in 1971 (U.S. Department of Labor, 1975, p. 145). Elementary school teachers earned at least $2,000 more a year exclusive of fringe benefits. In the 1973-74 school year, classroom elementary school teachers' national annual average salary was $10,341 or approximately $198 a week (U.S. Department of Labor, 1975, p. 150). Teachers also fared better than nurses. In 1973, the median annual earnings of staff nurses in local health agencies was $10,249 and $9,062 in non-official agencies (U.S. Department of Labor, 1975, pp. 153, 155).

Although the years are not the same and inflation and time have somewhat distorted the salary differentials, compared to other female sex-typed jobs, "Teaching appears to offer somewhat better opportunities than exist in other occupations," (Oppenheimer, 1970, p. 82).

Home and School Experiences Portray Elementary School Teaching as Attractive Work

Their home experiences and school experiences served to encourage the women to go into teaching. About two-thirds of the women were advised by their parents, particularly their mothers, to become elementary school teachers.

> My mother said I should be a teacher; it was the best job I could get, she said. (Harriet)

> My mother would not let me become a junior in college, -I had straight A averages in my first two years, -unless I promised to become a teacher. (Judy)

Unlike the men, four women had mothers who were elementary school teachers and also served as occupational role models and mentors. All but one of the mothers urged their daughters to be elementary school teachers and advised their daughters how to become teachers.

Most of the women were from working class or lower-middle class families, and had little long term exposure to college educated, professional women except for those women in traditional female jobs. Elementary school teachers were a visible "comparison type" reference group; a group which provided a "frame of comparison" salient for young females (Merton, 1975, p. 283).

> Ever since I was in kindergarten, I always wanted to be a teacher. . . . I loved my kindergarten teacher . . . and I've always loved working with children. (Jane)

Elementary school teachers do work young women are familiar with - - taking care of young children.

Their college experiences did not expand the occupational

choices of these women: they appear not to have had career advice that encouraged them to look beyond the traditional sex-typed occupations.

> I didn't have any good services in high school because I went to a small Catholic girls' school and the same thing happened at college. I guess I could have availed myself of the services that they had but I didn't. And I just like . . . kind of tried out classes to see what sounded interesting and what really looked good and I just sort of fell into teaching. For a while I was thinking about the law, political science and history. I went through a lot of different things. Part of the trouble was I didn't have any real good counseling. (Nancy)

> In terms of the type of performance that I used to do in school and all of that I was a lot smarter and I could have done a lot more. . . . I was very conditioned . . . like falling into the trap and believing a lot of stuff. . . . I never really fully explored all of the areas. (Barbara)

Without encouragement to look at other careers the women appeared to fall back on their previous experiences and the advice of their parents. Their college and family experiences were mutually reinforcing.

Teaching and Family Responsibilities

Four women who had always wanted to be teachers began teaching after having children.

> I had young children and I had to work. It seemed teaching was practical with young children. I used to work one or two days a week. . . . I could get a babysitter for one or two days a week. (Linda)

Elementary school teaching was one of the few jobs which gave women with children an opportunity to fulfill their family obligations as well as to earn money.

Teaching and the Social Mobility of Women

Other studies of teachers in the United States find that female teachers come from slightly higher status background than do male teachers (Lortie, 1975, p. 35 and Oppenheimer, 1970, p. 89). However, in this sample the men and women appeared to come from similar social class backgrounds. Most of the males and females came from families who did not have the financial resources to support them through graduate professional training. Ten of the women graduated from one of the public colleges, and several said their families would not have been able to send them to college if they had to pay tuition. Only three of the female teachers would have been able to support themselves through medical school, law school or social work school. Most of the women, like the men, felt financially compelled to go into the job market as soon as possible after college in order to support themselves and to help their families. Teaching was available upon graduation.

CONCLUSIONS

Most of the men decided to become teachers because they saw few other acceptable careers open to them or to avoid the draft. Their decisions were frequently made in their last year of college shortly before or just after graduation. Most of the men decided to teach on the elementary school level because a job was available and it seemed like an easier teaching assignment than junior high school teaching. Coming from lower-middle class and working class backgrounds and without exceptional college records, they realized there were few "pro-

fessional" middle class positions available to them with a Liberal Arts degree. Elementary school teaching offered the best returns in terms of salary, hours and working conditions.

The interviews reveal that men do not avoid a job just because it is sex-typed as female work. Males will cross sex-typed job lines if they see opportunities for financial rewards, good working conditions, and upward mobility. It appears that the lower salaries, and less desirable working conditions of women's work, compared to male sex-typed work, are the major reasons for men avoiding female sex-typed jobs.

Unlike the men, many of the women decided to become elementary school teachers before entering college. Most of the women decided to become elementary school teachers because early in their lives they appeared to realize there was sex segregation in the labor force and female sex-typed jobs were the only ones open to them. Compared to nursing, social work, and secretarial work teaching offered the best benefits. Teaching offered better working conditions and a higher salary than other female sex-typed jobs. The women's home and school experiences served to support their perception that teaching was a good job for a woman. It was work valued by their parents, specifically their mothers. Elementary school teachers were a visible reference group that did work the women were familiar with - - taking care of young children. Their college experiences did not open other occupational options to them. Elementary school teaching was a readily accessible job representing upward mobility for the women,most of whom came from working class and lower-middle class families.

The womens' reasons for becoming teachers indicates that perceived sex discrimination and the sex labeling of jobs are powerful factors affecting female career decisions. Women often chose to enter sex-typed jobs because at an early age they believe that these are the only jobs open to them. Without experiences to contradict their perceptions they then select among their restricted job options on the same basis males choose a job: they choose the job that offers the highest salary and the best working conditions. In sharp contrast, men choose a job without a preconception that being male will limit their career options. Thus, men may enter the labor force suffering from the constraints all working and lower class people face, but often women enter the labor force with the constraints imposed by both sex and class.

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